

Dave and Apple Pie

By Lt. Chris Conlon



Our plan was to take an MH-60R from NAS Patuxent River to the Dayton airshow. We would fly two legs, with a refueling stop in Morgantown, W.Va.

Our DD-175-1 showed the current weather conditions in Morgantown as 7,000-foot ceiling and 10-miles visibility. The en route minimum ceiling was forecast to be 5,000 feet, with winds 270/15. The briefed forecast for Morgantown at ETA was 5,000-foot broken ceiling, with seven miles visibility. On radar, a cold front was moving east and would pass north of the city. The MH-60R only is TACAN-equipped, and Morgantown does not have a compatible approach. So, we filed IFR and planned to cancel it to shoot a visual approach.

With a great weekend ahead of us, we took off Friday morning on our first leg. When we were 30 miles out, the weather was as forecast, so we told approach we were cancelling IFR and proceeding VFR. We descended to 1,000 feet AGL. As we passed a small ridgeline, it started to rain. Because it wasn't briefed, we figured it was an isolated shower. As we approached the next ridgeline, the rain increased, and the visibility rapidly was decreasing. We decided as a crew to turn around, climb, and call ATC for vectors to the field. When we turned around, we no longer could see the first ridgeline. We tried to call approach but could not climb high enough to establish comms without going into IMC conditions. The cockpit hurriedly became very quiet.

As we began an orbit to assess our situation, an opening appeared over the ridgeline in front of us. We aimed for the opening and continued toward Morgantown but not for long. The same thing happened to us on our way toward a third ridgeline; however, the ceiling was now about 500 feet, and the visibility was about one-half mile. We had set a hard deck of 300 feet and were now at it. We also only had about 20 minutes of fuel to our NATOPS on-deck limit. We just could see the bottom third of the hills around us—we were trapped. At this

time, my copilot spotted a pasture. Our crew discussed the situation, and we decided the most prudent action was to land in the field and wait out the weather.

Most helicopter crews brief that if you inadvertently go IMC you will do one of these options:

1. Try to reverse what you did which caused you to get into IMC.
2. Call approach to obtain a squawk and vectors to VMC.
3. If all else fails, land. We are a helicopter after all.

So, we did what we had briefed. It got interesting as we landed and saw a trailer in the tree line. Just as the dueling banjos began to play in our heads, an older gentleman, named Dave, and his wife came out and offered us some beers. The cold ones looked tempting, but something in 3710 wouldn't allow it. They invited us into their trailer, and we waited three hours for the weather to clear. Dave's wife even baked us an apple pie—I'm not kidding. We eventually made it to Morgantown, refueled, and landed in Dayton late that afternoon.

Our crew learned the importance of a good NATOPS crew brief that day. We never think emergencies will happen to us, but we brief them for that slim chance they might. I think most of us have been on a flight where the actual weather differed from the forecast. That's why our crew was prepared for inadvertent IMC, and it saved us. We all had a powerful case of "get to the airshow-itis," so it was difficult for us, as a crew, to believe that landing in a pasture with no definite departure time was our best option. However distasteful at the time, our crew made the right decision, and we all came away more experienced aviators. 🦅

Lt. Conlon flies with VX-1.